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## SOME INTERPRETERS OF WAGNER.

BY AMHERST WEBBER.

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IT is related that a would-be amateur of Wagner was advised, for his first hearing of "Tristan," to take a seat from which the stage could not be seen, and to follow the action in the book of words in order to prepare his understanding. He arrived late; and, judging from the terrific noise in the orchestra that there was, at least, a charge of cavalry on the stage, he asked his neighbor to find the place for him in the text-book. There he read the stage direction: "*Isolde stufzt*" (Isolde sighs.) The moral of this story is that in the modern orchestra lies the true stumbling-block of the singer of Wagner's opera. Those who have taken part in theatricals know how enormously the difficulty of expressing a shade of sentiment by inflection of voice is increased when the voice has to be raised above its natural pitch; it sweeps away all spontaneity, and compels the actor to find an artificial equivalent for the inflections that had occurred to him as he read through his part. Infinitely greater is the difficulty when a singer is required to suggest subtle shades of sentiment across the raging tempest of a Wagnerian orchestra. Every singer not gifted with a voice of phenomenal volume has to invent for himself a trick of voice production which will penetrate the orchestra without tiring him, and it is seldom that this is attained without the sacrifice of expression and color of voice. Hence, the well-worn cries, "How nice it would be without the shouting!" etc.

Things are vastly changed since the days of Italian opera of the old school. The Italian singer before Mario's time was an inferior stamp of person, without much education or intelligence. All that was expected of him was that he should have a sympathetic voice, know how to produce it, and how to phrase a *cantilena*; if, in addition, he had any personal charm, he became the

idol of the public. He had not a high respect for his faithful adorers in the Covent Garden stalls, for anecdotes are still fresh among Italians of the awful things they used to interpolate in the Italian text, to amuse one another at the expense of their innocent audience. Mario took the world by storm, not because his voice was in any way phenomenal, but because he was a gentleman (the first of the species in that profession), and knew how to wear costumes, and to make all the rôles he played seem possible. He had a very sympathetic *mezza-voce*, which he used throughout the length of an opera—as well he might, considering the lightness of the orchestra that accompanied him. Besides removing all danger of fatigue, this gave him a facility of expression impossible under the present condition of opera. For, to sing Wagner, one must have a voice of great volume and resistance, one must be a good musician, one must have intelligence, dramatic instinct, temperament and magnetism, in addition to being a good singer from the Italian standpoint. The man who possesses all these, it is true, is too near the ideal to be easily come at; but in these days the public refuses to listen to a singer who falls far short in any one of them.

Bayreuth is the last place to go to for the ideal artist; and yet, though the Bayreuth performances are far from perfect, those given elsewhere are always something of a compromise in comparison. For, in the Bayreuth theatre, the singer's chief difficulty was solved by Wagner himself. By sinking the orchestra in a pit, he made it possible for a singer to whisper if he wants to (and that is not too often), and yet be heard above the orchestra. The effect of this device is astounding; the orchestration of "Tristan," which elsewhere may seem an unwieldy mass of sound that forces the singer to shout or stand impotently agape, is at Bayreuth a fine lace-work accompaniment, full of wonderful detail, and capable of the minutest shades. It seems to be the most difficult of a conductor's many difficult duties to obtain a real *piano* from a full Wagnerian orchestra; for it is not until every member of the band has got his part thoroughly into his head, and on his fingers or lips, as the case may be, that anything approaching a *piano* is to be hoped for. In "Tristan," which is very fully scored, there are passages in which it is well nigh impossible not to cover the voice. How seldom, outside Bayreuth, does Isolde succeed in making herself heard all through the Liebestod! It was

only at the hands of Seidl, who had a wonderful knack of getting great accents out of his orchestra, and subduing it again immediately so as not to overpower her, that the singer could emerge from the ocean of sound that must otherwise have drowned her altogether. Seidl's sudden death was a terrible blow to all the artists who had worked with him, as well as to the great New York public. I know of no one who was so helpful in rehearsals. He was conductor, stage-manager and carpenter rolled into one. He would show the dragon how to fight, Siegfried how to forge his sword, the Rhine-daughters how to dive. A Wagner conductor is bound to have some skill in stage-management, since the music is so intimately connected with every detail on the stage. Seidl's training in this branch of his art had been exceptional; for, while still a boy, he had stood at Wagner's right hand, and was actually living at Wahnfried while the *Nibelungen Ring* was being composed. He delighted to talk of those days, and of the Meister, for whom he seems to have had a genuine affection, as well as an unbounded admiration. He told how Wagner used to get up at four or five in the morning and work steadily until late in the afternoon, with an interval for luncheon, nobody being allowed to go near him; how he was almost ludicrously susceptible to his surroundings, and must have his study draped with different colors, according to the work he was engaged upon, in order to bring himself into the right frame of mind. For instance, for "*Tristan*," the hangings were yellow and black; for the "*Walküre*," blue; for "*Siegfried*," of course, green; and for the "*Götterdämmerung*," a gloomy brown. When he set to work in the morning, he might have been heard hammering away at a single chord on the piano for a long time, to recreate the frame of mind in which he had left off the day before. What seems incredible is that he made but one rough sketch, and then wrote out the whole portentous score, with all the minute instructions, in that wonderfully neat hand of his, almost without a correction. Seidl remembered him coming in to luncheon in despair, because he had not sufficient instruments in his orchestra to do all that he wanted; this was when he was working at the finale of the "*Götterdämmerung*." One evening, when the whole family was assembled, he left the room and returned carrying a roll of manuscript under his arm; and, mimicking the manner of a professional pianist, he announced that he was going to play them a piece on the piano. At the best, he

was a very poor pianist, and it was impossible to make head or tail of what he was playing; but, nevertheless, when he had finished, eyes were moist. He had given them the first performance of the Funeral March in "Götterdämmerung."

When "Tristan" was first rehearsed at Munich, its performance was pronounced to be humanly impossible; and Wagner had already resigned himself to the idea of making changes in the score that would bring it within the range of mortal singers, when he was told that it could, after all, be given as it stood. It would certainly have been interesting to have the simplified edition. The great secret in learning one of the long Wagnerian rôles is to take plenty of time over it: a part learned quickly—by forced marches, as it were—is sure to be badly learnt; and, unless the words and music have impregnated the artist's blood long before rehearsals begin, many unsuspected faults will mar the performance. Hence foreign singers are generally more correct in words and music than Germans, because they have had to spend more time in learning their parts in the first instance. Jean de Reszke worked for three years at "Tristan," and for over two at "Siegfried," although no artist approaches him in facility. He studies most of his new parts at Skrzydlow (pronounced Skshidloof), his home in Poland, where he spends three months or so every year; and his work is none the worse for being diversified with shooting, riding, racing, lawn-tennis, and all that goes to make country life pleasant. Before he begins a new rôle, Madame de Reszke, who is an excellent linguist, writes out the German text and stage directions in a note-book, with a literal French translation of each word underneath. The learning is divided into three stages: the first, the words and music; the second, the words alone (Mme. de Reszke's note-book); and the third, the whole work from memory. M. Jean de Reszke read through the whole of the first act of "Siegfried" at the first sitting, and he knew both "Tristan" and "Siegfried" thoroughly fully twelve months before he sang them in public. He leaves as little as possible to the regular rehearsals on the stage; because, when the opera season has once opened, and he is singing twice or even three times a week, he cannot, consistently with his rule of avoiding rehearsals on the day before a performance, have as many rehearsals as he would like. The first time he was to sing Tristan to Madame Lilli Lehmann's Isolde in New York, he had been suffering from a bad cold, and

had been told by the doctor that his only chance of being able to sing lay in keeping his room till the night of the performance. On the day before the performance, Lilli Lehmann went to see him at his hotel. Refusing all assistance, she proceeded to push the sofas and chairs about until they represented to her satisfaction her state-room in King Mark's yacht. While she was thus employed, Marie Brema, who was to sing Brangaene, appeared on the scene. She had that moment arrived from London, and, hearing at the landing stage that there was to be a *Verstandigungs-Probe* in Jean de Reszke's room, she had, like a real Bayreuthian, left her luggage to its fate rather than miss anything in the nature of a rehearsal. Scarcely had she been announced when Van Rooy, the Kurwenal, who had also scented a rehearsal, burst into the room; King Mark was already on the spot in the person of M. Edouard de Reszke, and there followed an impromptu rehearsal which must have surprised the visitors in the neighboring rooms. For Lilli Lehmann, Marie Brema and Van Rooy, ignoring the smallness of the room, sang with all their lungs, and were as punctilious about their smallest gesture as if the eyes of the United States were upon them; while Jean de Reszke and his brother, who was singing that evening, just indicated their parts with the utmost economy of voice, from time to time vainly imploring the rest of the cast to save a little voice for the performance. At last, Isolde, to the huge delight of the audience that had collected on the landing outside, having insisted upon singing to the end of the *Liebestod*, fell dead upon the carpet, and was helped to her feet in a state which may be left to the imagination of those who know the temperature of American hotels. Her performance the next evening showed no sign of diminished energy. On arriving on the stage, she pointed with disgust to a skin lying at the foot of her couch, which certainly did look as if it might harbor malignant microbes, besides being a trap for unwary feet, and ordered it to be removed, and, the stage-manager vainly protesting, replaced it by an imitation Aubusson carpet which had been doing duty in "*La Traviata*" the night before. Taking her seat upon her couch, Isolde now sent for the conductor, and gave him minute instructions regarding the passages which were to be kept down; and the unfortunate prompter was then haled before her to be soundly rated for want of attention at her last performance. By the time the curtain rose, she had reduced every person in authority to a state of cringing obedience.

ence, and everything went just as Isolde wished it to go. It was a magnificent performance; and, at the end, Isolde, according to her custom, threw a hood over her head, and walked from the over-heated theatre through the frosty air to catch the tram-car which was to take her to her hotel. With such a constitution, a singer must be strangely content with his calling.

A New York newspaper reporter once put a delicate question to M. Jean de Reszke. "Tell me candidly, do you not think that you are paid absurdly high for what you do?" The answer was this: "On nights when I am in good health, voice, and spirits, it does seem that I am highly paid for doing what I love best to do; but when I am out of health, voice, and spirits, and yet have to make a superhuman effort not to disappoint my manager and the public, no sum in the world is too great to compensate me for what I have to go through."

The controversy about "cuts" is still burning. No human being can sit with undivided attention through any of Wagner's later works uncut, except with intervals of an hour or so between the acts, and that entails giving up the whole day to the performance, and at once puts the opera beyond the range of those for whom it was written. Unquestionably, outside Bayreuth, there must be cuts. Madame Wagner has advocated them on principle, and so did the Meister himself with the view of making his works popular. But herein lies the difficulty: Wagner having left no instructions as to how his work should be curtailed, no two singers or conductors agree on the point. For instance, Seidl recommends a cut as having been made at a performance attended by Wagner, who, when asked afterward if he objected to it, replied that he had not noticed it; yet other conductors condemn that cut as sacrilege, and in their turn suggest omissions that would have made Seidl's hair stand on end. I remember sitting near Madame Wagner at Covent Garden during a performance of "Die Meistersinger" in Italian. She was delighted with certain features of the performance; naturally, she had never heard the Preislied sung as Jean de Reszke sang it, and she was in ecstasies; she kept exclaiming that she caught new beauties of melody that no German singer had ever suggested, and she thought that Germans might find much to learn even in diction from this cosmopolitan cast. But she winced visibly, as if in bodily pain, whenever we came to a cut, and said that, with so much chopping, there could be no "*stimmung*" in

the performance. "It should be called 'Scenes from the 'Meistersinger,'" she said at last; "as such, it is an admirable performance!" Yet these "Scenes from the 'Meistersinger'" had lasted from eight o'clock in the evening till after midnight.

The ideal way of hearing a work of these dimensions would be to take no more than one act on each of three consecutive days. I shall never forget the effect of attending a rehearsal of the third act only of "Tristan" one morning. Those who have only heard it performed after the other two, and at the end of a day's work, cannot realize the stupendous effect that it has upon one who hears it with all the faculties rested.

Madame Wagner's appreciation of the Covent Garden rendering of "*I Maestri Cantori*" goes to prove that *bel canto* is as essential in Wagner's music as in any other; but, whereas in Italian Opera it was the end, in Wagner's it is only one of many means to an end. Wagner tried to find expression for the whole range of human emotions, and naturally he availed himself of all the means at his disposal. He pressed into his service the sister arts of poetry, music and mime, using them now singly, now in combination, with an unerring judgment as to which the dramatic exigencies required. At one time he finds his dramatic expression in words alone, and there the music takes a subordinate place, and everything should be sacrificed to a correct and clear declamation of the text, as in the dialogue between Tristan and Brangaene in the first act. At another, when he would express *Stimmungen* for which words alone would be inadequate, words in their turn become subsidiary to music, the essential medium. Again, there are situations where music suffices unassisted, as in the opening scene of the third act of "Tristan," or assisted only by gesture, as in the silent scene between Siegmund, Sieglinde and Hunding in the first act of the "Walküre." As a general rule, the German interpreter falls into the mistake of declaiming his whole rôle, as if it all fell into the first category, because he understands declaiming better than singing, and because he loves to spit his consonants in the face of his audience, and to do anything that will excuse him from singing a single phrase purely and smoothly; while the typical opera-singer—the Italian variety seems to be almost extinct—will fall into the opposite error, and fight shy of all strongly accented declamation which may interfere with the pose of his voice, trying to prune all into the shape of the pure, smooth singing that

he has spent his life in acquiring. Small wonder that Madame Wagner, while missing certain strong accents, found new melodies in "*I Maestri Cantori*" at Covent Garden, and that Jean de Reszke took all Wagner-lovers by storm when they first heard him in "*Tristan*." They had become resigned to looking upon that marvelous third act of "*Tristan*" as an almost purely orchestral work, in which the singer's part was limited to a mere dramatic declamation of the text without much variety of tone-color or exaggerated accuracy of intonation. It gave the listener the impression that it was extremely difficult for the singer. Before Jean de Reszke sang it, he had become sufficiently familiar with the methods of German singers to know the secret of their love of declamation, and he knew exactly when to sing and when to declaim, with the result that one seemed to find heart-rending melodies that one had never heard before, and that intervals which had till then appeared merely exceedingly difficult were transformed into the most melodious, natural, and even inevitable means of expression.

The work that a débutant has to undergo at Bayreuth before the performances is very severe. He has to arrive at the town many weeks before the first performance, knowing his part thoroughly. He then goes through a course of training with Herr Kniest, Madame Wagner's *alter ego*, who, besides possessing unerring taste in diction, is very clever at teaching correct declamation and in curing singers of bad habits contracted in study elsewhere. His duties at Bayreuth are arduous and varied. I once caught him between the acts of "*Götterdämmerung*" engaged in unharnessing a droschka horse. Grane had suddenly been taken ill, and this animal was on its way to its first rehearsal as his understudy. The next course of study is a truly alarming ordeal, for it consists in long mornings with Madame Wagner herself at Wahnfried. The pupil is first required to relate, in his own words, the story and meaning of the work of which he is to be the interpreter—no school-boy's task; and then to give a full-blown performance of it on the hearthrug, Madame Wagner herself filling all the other parts that are necessary. And, since the mistress is inexhaustible, the pupil must sing with full voice, and be proof against any fatigue, vocal or physical. Madame Wagner has been overheard to remonstrate with a Brunhild, who throughout a tropical morning had been working with her whole mind and body and voice, and to declare that without "energy" nothing could be

accomplished, although, Heaven knows, want of energy is the last reproach that can be levelled against this particular Brunhild. Yet, with very few exceptions, all who have undergone this course of training, however they may have differed from Madame Wagner on certain points, admit that they have profited by it incalculably. There are, besides, countless long rehearsals on the stage, first without, and afterward with, the orchestra. It is through these that the Bayreuth performances acquire a spirit that cannot be attained elsewhere; but one wonders why they are not even more perfect than they are, for although the *ensemble* is generally excellent, the performance of the individual artist is often on quite a different level. But this is the fault of the material rather than the workmanship. Madame Wagner has to choose between raw recruits with good voices, who are only too anxious to put themselves under her guidance in everything, but who have not been through the mill of vocal study, and artists already formed, who have thought out their parts and object to be under the artistic dictatorship of any one. Moreover, singers who have made their name, and have to go through long seasons in London and New York, cannot be expected to sacrifice the only months in which they can recuperate at health-giving waters or mountain air to hard labor in Bayreuth during July and August.

There seems to be an extraordinary wealth of magnificent voices among German women, who fall into fewer errors in voice-production than the men; but how rarely we meet a German *prima donna* who has any feminine grace or personal magnetism! Generally, excessive energy of voice and gesture are made to serve for real temperament, and an unconvincing substitute they make. Temperament is not the same as violence: it cannot fail to reveal itself as strongly in a simple phrase, simply spoken, as in the most overpowering loosing of the flood-gates of passion, and an audience may be moved more by what a real artist keeps back than by what he gives out. He who allows himself to be run away with on the stage by what is called temperament, carries no more conviction to his audience than a man in a rage does to a crowd in the street. He merely gives an impression of unseemly impotence, and loses altogether that concentration of expression which is what really moves his hearers. In recalling the rôles that have most appealed to us in the work of any great dramatic artist, how seldom it is the violent outbursts of emotion that leave a lasting impression!

Is it not oftener a look, or a subtle inflection of the voice, which is achieved not by temperament alone, but by temperament restrained by art? It is only art and hard study that can give to temperament the equilibrium and beauty that it requires for its perfect expression. A celebrated Wagnerian *prima donna*, speaking of a colleague, said that what she admired most in him was the wonderful way in which he abandoned himself, even though, his voice not being very strong, he was worn out before the end of the evening. It showed a spirit of heroic self-sacrifice; but, in the language of the gallery, one would like to ask, "Where do the audience and the music come in?" There is something admirable and pathetic in the German genius for self-sacrifice to their art. Friedrichs, the greatest of Beckmessers, worked so hard that he was laid up with brain-fever after his first season at Bayreuth. He took the part of Alberich there two years ago, and declaimed the whole of the scene in which he appears to Hagen in a vision (in the second act of "Götterdämmerung") in a mysterious hoarse whisper which was exceedingly telling, but which one felt must be tearing his poor vocal chords to shreds. When I met him some months afterward at St. Petersburg, he told me that he was only just out of the hands of the doctors, who had warned him never to abuse his voice again in that fashion. Schnorr, the tenor, who created Tristan, died very soon after its production.

The ideal Wagner singer must have self-restraint, but first among his qualifications must be a constitution of iron and nerves of steel.

AMHERST WEBBER.